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ABSTRACT

American studies is a combination of fields such as literature, history, philosophy, politics, and economics. This publication examines how the different fields of study relate to American studies through folklore or folktales. The use of folktales can provide better illustrations and understandings of U.S. individuals' heritage and evolution. Famous artists noted for using folktales to describe U.S. culture are Mark Twain and John Steinbeck. (JAG)

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# AMERICAN STUDIES THROUGH FOLK TALES[1]

## *Folklore and American studies*

> The basic social sciences, the language arts, and the fine and practical arts all have aspects of similarity, and there is some overlapping among them. If that common area could be described wherein these fields of study converge into a synthesized, interrelated body of knowledge and skills, appreciations, and attitudes, then that common core would probably be folklore (HECTOR H. LEE and DONALD ROBERSON, *Lore of Our Land*)[2].

American Studies is a chameleonic and widely encompassing new academic discipline, involving history and literature, sociology and philosophy, political science and economics, the arts and music, anthropology and enthnography — including the study of folklore. Americanists through the study of folklore (tales, songs, and dance), as well as similar formal literature (novels, poetry, and ballet), hope to arrive at an understanding and definition of American "civilization" of the past and present, at the same time that they are trying to define their own interdisciplinary studies. Hennig Cohen, in *American Folklore and American Studies*, affirmed: "American Studies has available from many areas many kinds of 'evidence' and many

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[1] This paper is meant as a follow-up to one published in "Messana" (primo fascicolo della sezione Lingue e Letterature straniere) entitled *American Studies Through Folk Songs*.

[2] HECTOR H. LEE and DONALD ROBERSON, *Lore Of Our Land*, Harper and Row, Evanston, IL, 1963, p. VII.

varieties of 'objects'. Because folklore is a deliberate and calculated creative expression of man, it possesses great potential usefulness. This in no way violates the integrity of folklore materials. In fact, only through a knowledge of them as folklore can they be used effectively for American civilization purposes"[1].

In 1888 the American Folklore Society was formed by writers like Mark Twain, historians like Francis Parkman, ethnologists like Franz Boas, and folklorists like Francis James Child, along with enthusiastic amateur collectors (teachers, doctors, clergy, travelers, etc.) to collect, classify, catalog, and analyze all forms of traditional verbal material, found in both written sources (not always reliable) and oral sources (somewhat difficult to manage). Before beginning this first century of work, the Society divided American folklore into four categories: 1) British in origin 2) African in origin 3) American Indian 4) Ethnic in origin—not in the English language. Folk tale collecting began among the American Indians even before the Society was formed, but among whites collecting started only in this century in the Appalachian and Ozark mountains, then moving into the Northeast, the deep South, and the Southwest. Folklorists study the origins and creation of folk tales, the variations and different forms of tales, the dynamics of dissemination and change in the folk process, the cultural and historical settings, and the social and psychological significance to the original tellers. The life histories of a tale and its variants are traced using an archetype developed by Kaarle Krohn known as the historic-geographic method. As Coffin and Cohen point out in *Folklore in America*: "Perhaps, the closest one comes to treating American folklore as a unit is when he traces the life history of a story or song that has been diffused widely in this country. For example, the old tale, *The Deck of Cards*, has found its way into Maine, Michigan, and Pennsylvania lumber camps,

[1] Hennig Cohen, *American Folklore and American Studies: A Final Comment*, in: "Journal of American Folklore", vol. 72 (1959), p. 241.

onto the frontier with the buffalo skinners, and into the repertoire of all sorts of hill folk, cowboys, and city people. Originally European, it has been shared all over this country by men of French, African, British descent—becoming American as they have"[1].

*Folk tales and American culture*

> Here are heroes different from those of other nations, a special kind of violence, humor, and sentiment that appeals to the majority of Americans. Where but in the United States does one lay so much stress on movement, low birth, self-education, upward mobility, cleverness, and large (if not colossal) heroes with a flair, not always intentional, for the comic? (JANE POLLEY, ed., *American Folklore and Legend*)[2].

Folk tales illustrate and interpret the culture of the United States. In the tales of the past, Americans paint their self-portrait, dwelling on their common identity: their distinctive sense of humor; their widerspread tendency to boost their region, its people, and its weather, and slam all others; their distrust of strangers and newcomers, Eastern aristocrats, and foreign snobs, making fun of them and of their ideas of the frontier; their difficult relations within a multiracial society expressed in vicious racist jokes; their fascination with violence shouted in the bloody folk stories of fights between rivermen and backwoodsmen and western brawlers; and their repressed sexuality whispered in 'dirty' stories. As the *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend* indicates, "[Folk tales] provide an outlet for the 'individual competitive aggressiveness' of American society (...) In this way the pioneer let

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[1] TRISTRAM P. COFFIN and HENNIG COHEN (eds.), *Folklore in America*, Doubleday, New York 1966, p. XVIII.

[2] JANE POLLEY (ed.), *American Folklore and Legend*, Reader's Digest Association, Pleasantville, NY, 1978, p. 8.

off steam and 'laughed it off' or made 'terrible faces playfully' at the hazards and hardships of the frontier"[1]. Through folk tales the people create their own living "myth" of the rugged outdoor life of self-sufficiency and individual freedom in which to live out the dream of opportunity of the American frontier.

Telling folk tales means the preserving and keeping alive of the authentic traditional culture of the regional, occupational, and ethnic groups of the past and present in their own words. It reflects the values and assumptions of the culture, and reveals the reality beneath the statistics, especially the sociology of minorities and subcultures. The strong Afro-American culture was denied literature, nonetheless a "separate Negro subculture formed with the shell of American life, missing the bounties of general education and material progress, remaining a largely oral, self-contained society with its own unwritten history and literature"[2]. As black writer, Ralph Ellison has acknowledged, "In folklore we tell what Negro experience really is (...) with a complexity of vision that seldom gets into our writing"[3]. Folk tales promote intra- and inter- cultural understanding, through their universality and their deep insights into the true nature of a people.

## *American folk tale types*

> If the genius of this lore has been for realistic anecdote, extravagant yarn, and comic hero legend rather than for sacred hero tale, other wordly myth, and fairy tale, the reason is simple. Americans, like people

[1] MARIA LEACH (ed.), *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend* ("American Folklore"), Funk & Wagnalls, New York, 1949, p. 46.

[2] RICHARD M. DORSON, *American Negro Folktales*, Fawcett, New York 1958, p. 12.

[3] RALPH ELLISON, *A Very Stern Discipline*, in: "Harper's", 234 (March, 1967), n.p.

> the world over, sing, yarn, jest, brag, create heroes, and 'whistle in the dark', not only about universal themes and motives and in age-old patterns, but also about the experiences that are closest to them and interest them most[1].

Folk tales in the United States have roots in those of many cultures[2], and, at the same time, present distinctive elements and types. *Fables*, like the Aesop classics; the difficult-to-define *myths* like the Greek or Roman stories, set in a prereality world of semidivine heroes; and, the favorites of parents and teachers, Märchen, nursery, wonder, household, or *fairy tales*[3], unreal, nevernever land stories—are not part of the national lore (though there are myths and legends of a special type among the American Indians). Tales of supernatural adversaries, ghosts, giants, witches, and devils, appeared in early America, but vampires, ogres, revenants, werewolves, dwarfs, fairies, elves, and leperchauns were left behind in the Old World.

In American tales, happenings, characters, disasters, etc. are narrated in *local legends*: stories about great men—Boone, Carson, or Bridger; place legends connected with the location of buried treasures, lost mines, haunted houses, and lovers' leaps; para-history like the story of the first Thanksgiving, Washington and the cherry tree, Lincoln's education, the brave pioneer crossing the plains, the noble savage and the happy slave. Though they follow classic patterns and reproduce ancient motifs, these tales are reality-based, beginning: "One time there was" instead of "Once upon a time".

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[1] LEACH, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

[2] STITH THOMPSON'S *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (6 vols., Indiana University Studies, Bloomington, IN, 1932-1936), and Thompson's translation and enlargement of ANTTI AARNE'S *Verzeichnis der Märchentypen*, *The Types of the Folk Tale*, FF Communications, Helsinki 1928), show the wide cross-cultural spread of tales.

[3] Fairy tales include classics like: Cinderella, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Sleeping Beauty, the Three Little Pigs, Little Red Riding Hood, the Emperor's New Clothes, Jack and the Beanstalk, and so on, many of which come to us from the German Grimm brothers and the Danish author Hans Christian Andersen.

> A composite picture of the American hero would show him to be a plain, tough, practical fellow, equally good at a bargain or a fight, a star-performer on the job and a hell-raiser off it, and something of a salesman and a showman, with a flair for prodigious stories, jokes, and stunts and a general capacity for putting himself over (B.A. BOTKIN, *A Treasury of American Folklore*)[1].

The American *hero tales* deal with the same kinds of common people who invented them and spread them: anti-social bullies, rogues, and thieves (Davy Crockett, Mike Fink, Roy Bean, Jesse James, etc.) or hard working, strong, courageous men and women (John Henry, Casey Jones, Joe Magarac, etc.). Classic American heroes include: New England bred eccentrics like the smart, taciturn, yankee peddler and tinkerer with gadgets (ancestor of Tom Edison, Hank Ford, and Steve Wozniak?), the roaring backwoodsman of the Southern mountains (ancestor of the hillbilly), the wise or foolish black 'Uncle Tom' of the lowland Delta (Shirley Temple's friend), the western rambler (on either side of the law like Wyatt Earp), the wild woman (like Calamity Jane), the animal trickster (like Brer Rabbit), and the American worker (the sailor, the cowboy, the lumberjack, the railroader, the miner, etc.). The hero tales reveal a great deal about a people because they contain the most admired and desired representative qualities of the collectivity.

The most common type of story, the *comic anecdote* is an older brother to the joke, with a wise or witty point or punchline. As a way to add color to social conversation or to win an argument or illustrate a point, they were often told by—and told on—preachers, politicians, lawyers, salesmen, etc., to point out extreme personality traits such as: stinginess, meanness, stubbornness,

[1] B.A. BOTKIN, *A Treasury of American Folklore*, Crown, New York 1944, pp. 2-3.

ugliness, ignorance, laziness, absent-mindedness, and general eccentricity. The oft-cited *tall tales*, or "windies", are not only exaggerated brags but creative lies of paradoxical inanities—extravagant deception as a form of entertainment. Falling somewhere in between legends and fairy tales, the tall tales grow from a kernal of fact in the already over-sized natural setting of North America, where incredible traveler's tales tell of wild human behavior; animal tales describe queer, unbelievable animals like the hoop snake and the jackalope; and hunting and fishing tales are of the you-should-have-seen-the-one-that-got-away variety. Completing the humorous tales of the American people are the most characteristic—the long, loose, understated *yarn* or "shaggy dog stories". Told in bars, general stores, barber shops, and other meeting places, these tales of personal experience about seemingly-ordinary outrageous incidents are full of distracting and irrelevant detail to establish confidence and secure credence, building up with the repeated obstacles and retarded climax devices of fairy tales to a let-down anticlimax. They take their time to create an effect, not to make a point, through expert timing and the use of the pause, in a casual, solemn-faced, whimsical style. As Mark Twain described in his essay *How To Tell A Story*, "To string incongruities and absurdities together in a wandering and sometimes purposeless way, and seem innocently unaware that they are absurdities, is the basis of the American art, if my position is correct"[1]. This is leg-pulling risen to an art form. James Tidwell in *A Treasury of American Folk Humor* goes so far as to assert that, "there would be little question that America's greatest contribution to the humor of the world has been the humorous story—the rambling, digressive story which is essentially oral in its method"[2].

[1] Ibid, p. 490.

[2] JAMES N. TIDWELL (ed.), *A Treasury of American Folk Humor*, Crown, New York 1956, p. XVI.

*American folk tale characteristics*

> Oral tradition is made up of the material that men and women who can't, don't, or won't write pass on from generation to generation by word of mouth. ... When it is halted by printing or recording, folklore enters a state of suspended animation. It comes alive again only when it flows back into oral circulation[1].

The folk culture of the United States, the tales, songs, and speech of the people, is essentially oral — non-literate, though not always illiterate. Any form of literature (high-brow belletristic to low-brow "mind-rot") can flow in and out of the oral folk tradition, as a source of or a product of or a type of folk literature. Folk tales are communal and group-building, strengthening the sense of security and even of superiority within a community or clan. They are found and developed in the US where people are isolated: in the Southern mountains, along the New England coast, among the Illinois "Egyptians", and the Pennsylvania "Dutch", the Cajuns, the Mormons, the Mexican-Americans, etc., but at the same time tales migrate and become national property when the typical mobility of the restless American people carries them far from home. American folklore is more difficult to define than the folklore of other countries because the United States grew so quickly to such large proportions, going in one lifetime from a rural, agricultural society to an urban, industrial nation, that the various regional, ethnic, socio-economic, occupational, or religious groups that make it up each have their own lore, there being little national identity other than the combination of these. Handed down or absorbed rather than learned or invented, folk tales are continually developing and being spontaneously recreated. The pattern toward urbanization, consolidation, and homogenization and the original old world lore sup-

[1] COFFIN and COHEN (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. XIII-XIV.

planted or modified by new world influences and by pop and literary cultural influences can seem to extinguish folklore. Marshall Fishwick, in *Folklore, Fakelore, and Poplore*, notes however that, "perhaps the notion that folklore is dying out is itself a kind of folklore"[1]. Definitions of "contemporary folklore" include office lore, computer lore, television lore, advertising lore, and so on. "To the forces of survival and contra-acculturative reversion must also be added the forces of revival as intercultural and folk education, folk festivals, etc., which seek to promote group self-respect and mutual understanding by showing the essential unity underlying differences, stressing participation in a common culture rather than 'contributions', reconciling conflicts between old and new cultural patterns, and generally replacing stereotypes with cultural variations"[2].

*Folk and pop lore*

> Pecos Bill didn't come from the Wild West, but from the typewriter of Edward ("Tex") O'Reilly. Annie Christmas's spicy saga can be traced not to the New Orleans brothels but to the typewriter of Lyle Saxon. Margaret Montague dreamed up Tony Beaver. Daddy Joe was contrived by Stewart Holbrook. Big Mose by Herbert Asbury, Whiskey Jack by Charles Brown, and Strap Buckner by Florence Barns. Jeremiah refined fakelore by combining the appeal of sailors and cowboys—his "Bowleg Bill" specialized in riding giant tunas [3].

It may come as an unpleasant shock to discover that many of America's favorite folk heroes are phonies; the most disturbing revelation of all being that Paul Bunyan, the giant lumberjack, "owed much of his fame to a free-lance advertising man, William B. Laughead, hired by the Red River Lumber Company to sell their pro-

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[1] MARSHALL FISHWICK, *Folklore, Fakelore, and Poplore*, in: "Saturday Review" (August 26, 1967), p. 43.

[2] LEACH, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

[3] FISHWICK, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

ducts"[1]. His exploits were then popularized in the books of the "folk-liar", James Stevens in the 1920s and 30s. This pseudo-Americana or pop lore was called "fakelore" by Richard Dorson in March 1950 in the *American Mercury*, meaning popular literature and culture mascarading as traditional lore, written specifically to be more palatable, easier to swallow, and more salleable to the tradition-starved, culture-buying public. Created overnight or stolen from the ready-made symbols and legends of other countries, it is also produced, in some cases, to rewrite social history by mythologizing the past. Popular literature, or sub-literature, is a commercial product or promotional material created for mass consumption, presenting a fantasy world of good guys, bad guys, tear-jerkers, and happy endings. Comic books, pulp novels, television soap operas, pop songs, B-movies, and so on, with the intellectual consistency of cotton candy, are purposely confused with real literature or real folklore in an opportunistic attempt at legitimacy. True tales have been bowlderized almost beyond recognition—Davy Crockett, Billy the Kid, etc. are now selling cornflakes or used cars. Bogus lore, inspired by the modern media, abounds in America. While American Indian culture was all folk tales, and medieval European culture was mostly oral, twentiethcentury American culture is mostly popular and consumistic, with very little purely oral material in circulation, but, fortunately, with a great deal preserved from the past. It has been said that folklore has taken a beating in America, but the cycle is not complete and pop lore is still sometimes entering the true oral tradition. (Children's rhymes nowadays are often satirical parodies of advertising jingles). "In the reciprocity of oral and written tradition and the flux of cultural change and exchange, revival plays as important a part as survival, popularization is as essential as scholarship, and the final responsibility rests upon the accumulative and collective taste and judgment of the many rather than the few"[2].

[1] Ibid.

[2] LEACH, "Folklore", in: B.A. BOTKIN, op. cit., p. 398.

*Folk tales and literature*

> The appeal of a literary work is fundamentally dependent upon its evocation of audience concern and identification through the expression and elucidation of its topic in images, symbols, characters, events, situations, attitudes, expressions, and customs that are the product of folklore.... If folklore is how we live day to day, the habits and customs that we acquire from watching our parents and those around us, then literature is to a large extent a documented account of these customs, a written record of human patterns of living (STEVEN SWANN JONES, *Folklore and Literature in the United States*)[1].

Folk or oral literature is the primary literature of life; more concerned with simple emotion, content, plot, and theme than many written forms. Subjects and structure are closely interrelated, while symbols and accepted images give a tale power. Gerald Haslam, in *American Oral Literature: Our Forgotten Heritage*, observes: "Oral literature tends to present the bare bones of experience, and to elicit complex spiritual and intellectual responses"[2]. Folk tales have been honed to superior quality by thousands and thousands of disinterested critics who found them worth telling, retelling, and passing on to the next generation. An outdated, or uninteresting tale is dropped by the people like a hot potato.

> In spinning extravagant yarns and lying tales [illegible]olk has also had the cooperation of professional story-tellers in the reciprocity of oral and written tradition that exists in America. Thus a long line of Southern and Western humorists, culminating in Mark Twain, converted the yarn and tall tale from oral to literary use, emulating the matter and manner of the oral and natural story-teller. As a result (e.g. in

[1] STEVEN SWANN JONES, *Folklore and Literature in the United States*, Garland, New York 1984, p. XIV.

[2] GERALD HASLAM, *American Oral Literature: Our Forgotten Heritage*, in: "English Journal", vol. 60, no. 6 (September 1971), p. 711.

New England), the line between folklore, local history, and local-color writing is sometimes hard to draw[1].

Folk tales, existing thousands of years before print, are the oldest form of literature. Folklore is used in literature to add authenticity, as in Melville's use of whale lore in *Moby Dick*; to create a mood, as in Hawthorne's use of witchlore in *The Scarlet Letter*; to explore the realistic use of dialog, as in Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, or the international theme, as in *Innocents Abroad*; to vitalitize, as in Emerson's use of proverbs; to structure, as in Dickinson's use of ballad metrics; to provide a social setting, as in Faulkner's short story *The Bear*; to define the African-American element, as in the use of the trickster in Ellison's *Invisible Man*; and finally to give resonance and meaning, as in Fitzgerald's use of legend and fairy tale materials in *The Great Gatsby*. As one investigates the subtle and complex relationship between folklore and formal literature one discovers how literature is superimposed on folklore, and how folklore nourishes literature, and vice versa. Some of the most-admired works of American prose are rewritten versions of folk tales that have existed in oral traditions for generations, while many others *use* folklore as the basis for a creative work. The list of works of literature with folk tale roots would be almost endless. Nathaniel Hawthorne gave a Gothic treatment to Greek myths in *The Wonder Book* and *Tanglewood Tales*. Edgar Allan Poe's short story *The Man That Was Used Up* is taken from a classic comic anecdote about a supremely ugly woman. And his story, *The Gold Bug*, is from the same legend of finding Captain Kidd's treasure as is Washington Irving's *The Money Diggers* in *Tales of a Traveler*. Critic Albert Bigelow Paine writes about *Tom Sawyer*: "The famous 'whitewashing' episode is to-day something more than mere literature. It has entered the realm of folk-lore—taken its place in that corner of Story

[1] LEACH, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

Land, where the old tales remain always fresh, and never lose their fashion, because they are immortal"[1]. What Paine ignores is that the story comes from a long ancestoral line of other folk tales including the European classic *Stone Soup*.

> Folkloristics is a particularly useful and insightful approach to literary criticism. Identifying the proverbs underlying a Dickinson poem or an Edward Taylor poem, or the use of sea talk in Melville or legends in Pynchon, exposes in a very immediate way the appeal and significance of these texts[2].

The interrelationship between oral and written traditions is so close that it is often impossible and injust to separate them. The student can analyze oral literature, investigating all the elements of prose, and the elements of drama, but must remember that it was meant to be told not read. Dorson suggests: "Compare the Uncle Remus stories of Joel Chandler Harris with oral texts of Negro tales containing the same plots, and the world of difference between the literary and the folk tale can at once be discerned"[3]. Folklore in literature is studied first by biographical, internal, and external documentation, then the purpose and meaning of the lore in literature is considered. Lastly, folklore in literature is analyzed as a type of performance—oral and written forms being the same in their appeal to the audience, narrative patterns, sociological premises, and rhetorical strategies, like the so-called 'willing suspension of disbelief'. The theoretical basis for these studies stems from Johann Gottfried von Herder's philosophy of literature, as told in Gene Bluestein's *The Voice of the Folk: Folklore and American Literary Theory*:

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[1] BOTKIN, *op. cit.*, p. 402.

[2] JONES, *op. cit.*, p. XII.

[3] RICHARD M. DORSON, *Buying the Wind*, Univ. of Chicago, Chicago 1964, p. 2.

"that a nation's literature is truly national and legitimately its own when it arises from the folklore of its people"[1].

*Folk tales and history*

> [The foundation of American folklore is found in] the great dramatic movements of American history: exploration and colonization, Revolution and the establishment of a democratic republic, the westward surge, the tides of immigration, the slavery debate that erupted in Civil War, and the triumph of technology and industrialization... These forces have affected the folk tradition brought into the United States from Europe, Africa, and Asia, and they have shaped and created new folklore, or new adaptations of old folklore themes (RICHARD M. DORSON, *American Folklore and the Historian*)[2].

Folk tales represent all that is considered valuable in history, the entire intellectual and aesthetic life of man. They bind the present to the past, acting as what Dewey Chambers calls "the cement of society"[3]. "The comparative student of the folktale sees that, in addition to the intrinsic interest which every story has as a means of entertainment or for giving aesthetic pleasure, it presents a challenging problem in social history and at the same time furnishes help toward the solution of that very problem"[4]. To know folk tales is to know the culture of the people who made them and to know those people. The bonds, both cultural and emotional, that

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[1] GENE BLUESTEIN, *The Voice of the Folk: Folklore and American Literary Theory*, Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts, 1972, p. 66.

[2] RICHARD M. DORSON, *A Theory of American Folklore*, in: "Journal of American Folklore", 72 (1959), pp. 197-215, reprinted in: DORSON, *American Folklore and the Historian*, Univ. of Chicago, Chicago 1971, pp. 15-48.

[3] DEWEY W. CHAMBERS, *Storytelling and Creative Drama*, Wm. C. Brown, Dubuque, IO 1970, p. 3.

[4] STITH THOMPSON, *The Folktale*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York 1946, p. 428.

tie the dead to the living in folk tales, are felt most strongly on alocal level. Each region has its own tales; the New England coasts, the plantations of the Old South, the forests of the Far North, the Midwestern plains, the Southwestern deserts, and so on, all preserve local history from the relatively recent settlement period to the present. This is history that reveals the values, fears, hopes, and dreams from the knowledge of the everyday lives of ordinary people, many of whom were witnesses to the events. Their oral folk histories are studied from two points of view: that of the historian interested in factual reconstruction of the past, and that of the anthropologist interested in society's view of its own past. Studying folklore is making history one's own. "Allan Nevins has declared that the most fascinating part of history but the most difficult to obtain is the record of how plain men and women lived and were affected by the social, economic, and cultural changes of their times. (...) One means of redressing the inattention to the common folk in American life and history is through the use of folklore sources" (RICHARD M. DORSON, *America in Legend*)[1].

*Folk tales and language*

> Twain's was a language experiment which, at bottom, demonstrated that an American vernacular was capable of sustaining the full range of human experience in an expression consciously devoid of high diction. Yet Twain is not literally a folk writer, though like Whitman he operates with a folk ideology similar to Herder's and Emerson's[2].

In folk tales one experiences the living language at a level above and beyond everyday use. Folk tales are told in authentic, non-stan-

[1] RICHARD M. DORSON, *America in Legend*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1973, p. XIII.

[2] BLUESTEIN, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

dard, native American English of the richest and most colorful kind. The changes in the American language even follow the generations of folk heroes; the Revolutionary War period yankee used the Queen's English but with growing Americanisms, the War of 1812 period backwoodsman expressed himself in pure American slang, and the pre- and post-Civil War black man had his own hybrid language. Folk speech is intimately tied to the tales that are its maximum expression. "The value of this floating linguistic material for both the poet and social historian is evinced by the successful use of talk, jokes, and lingo made by Carl Sandburg in both *Abraham Lincoln, the Prairie Years* and *The People, Yes*"[1].

Transforming the language, style, setting, or content of oral tales has been happening for millenia; each culture and each storyteller bringing something of their own to the tale. However, transcribing and translating a folk tale from colloquial to standard speech is a questionable practice that has led to bowlderization and the ruin of folklore, only justifiable in special circumstances—if the reader's first language is not English, for example. In any case, a faithful reproduction of the essence of a performed oral tale is extremely difficult to capture on the written page. Even more so if the tale crosses linguistic borders: "The more important the textural features are in a given genre of folklore, the more difficult it is to translate an example of that genre into another language" (ALAN DUNDES, *Interpreting Folklore*)[2].

## *Folk tales and education*

The story of John Smith and Pocahontas, the Parson Weems account of George Washington and the cherry tree, the saga of Hiawa-

[1] BOTKIN, *op. cit.*, p. 410.

[2] ALAN DUNDES, *Interpreting Folklore*, Indiana Univ., Bloomington, IN 1980, p. 22.

> tha, the Abraham Lincoln legends, the stereotyped characterizations of the American Indian, Irish immigrant, or Negro—such instances of traditional lore and countless others have been in our schools since the beginning of American education. (HECTOR H. LEE, *American Folklore in the Secondary Schools*)[1].

Teachers must be conscious of the risk, while using folk tales, of perpetuating stereotypes, of falsifying history, and of teaching as true what was meant as caricature. Nonetheless, the vitality and endurance of tales present exciting pedagogic possibilities. They function as a content-based listening activity, an example of fundamental oral literature, an intimate snapshot of American culture, and much more.

> A good storyteller in the classroom is able to provide one of the richest experiences with our language that [learners] can have. The very idea that living words can create a world, pose and solve problems, influence emotions, create images, and provide such delight, is a credit to storytelling's value as a needed part of the language arts program (DEWEY W. CHAMBERS, *Storytelling and Creative Drama*)[2].

Folk tales, so rich in linguistic qualities, are an irresistable resource for language instruction. American traditional tales, can provide excellent raw material for various listening experiences and exercises, in real American English. If "Good English is", as Robert Pooley stated in 1933, "that form of speech which is appropriate to the purpose of the speaker, true to the language as it is, and comfortable to speaker and listener"[3], then American folk ta-

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[1] HECTOR H. LEE, *American Folklore in the Secondary Schools*, in: "English Journal", (October 1970), p. 994.

[2] CHAMBERS, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

[3] ROBERT C. POOLEY, *Grammar and Usage in Texbooks on English*, Bureau of Educational Research Bulletin No. 14 Univ. of Wisconsin, Madison, WI 1933, p. 155.

les make perfect linguistic instructional materials, as some teachers have realized for decades. Activities for creating language and using language creatively which involve folklore and language could include: simple and complex comprehension questions after a told story, discussions related to the story's themes and suppositions about the characters' behavior, descriptive analysis of speech and reproduction in role plays or dramatizations, cooperative storytelling, add-on stories, finishing stories, story fill-in or guessing games, modernizing stories, paraphrasing or summarizing stories[1]. Teachers can not afford to forget that, "pleasure for its own sake is an important part of language learning, a fact which is often overlooked by the teacher in his quest for teaching points, or by the course designer focussing on presentation or repetition"[2].

> Ultimately, the most convincing argument for the inclusion of oral modes in an American literature curriculum is that, for a great many people today, it is the primary form of literary experience, part of them rather than part of a tradition which they identify with an alien Culture—with a capital C. Such people are important; so is the literature they prefer, whether educators have been trained to appreciate it or not. And, of course, we'll never really know the worth of oral modes until we first develop organic critical standards with which to evaluate them, then give them the same continuing, open-minded examination we currently give only the more prestigious written forms[3].

It is important to avoid imposing elitist literary tastes on students and to recognize the value of the culture (often oral) of the sons and daughters of the working class. "Teachers shouldn't *ignore* the oral tradition; rather it should be used as a supplement, as another

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[1] E. MARTIN PEDERSEN, *Teaching English with American Folk Tales*, paper read at the TESOL-ITALY annual convention, November, 1990.

[2] JACK RICHARDS, *Songs in Language Learning*, in: "TESOL Quarterly", 3:2 (1969), n. p.

[3] HASLAM, *op. cit.*, p. 709.

important classroom resource. And there is no question that the verve and originality of, say, the sung poetry of American Indian cultures or the socially accurate animal tales told by slaves might profitably replace much of the undeniably dull, redundant material presently cluttering colonial American literature courses"[1]. Oral literature is the object of study, not just a means to interest the student of fiction using a more accessable form. As John Povey reminded, "One teaches literature because one believes the activity valuable in itself, and any other advantage to be derived from that occupation is a by-product (...). We need works of literature that produce the best responses in class"[2]. Tales are not widely included in literature curriculums because teachers are not trained to deal with them, but if they opened their programs to fundamental folk tales, they would certainly find them stimulating and invaluable literary resources.

> Democracy is based on a belief in the integrity of man, the dignity of the individual, equality of opportunity, man's rationality, man's goodness, man's practicality, man's ability to govern himself and solve his problems cooperatively, and his faith in the future of his country. The folklore of the Henry Ford story, as found in "Hank, The Free Wheeler", in "John Henry", the steel-drivin' man who beats the steam drill, the legend of the bandit Joaquin Murieta, or the beautiful love story of Abe Lincoln and Ann Rutledge can translate these abstract concepts into terms of human life so students can understand them and enjoy them in the telling[3].

A student of language or literature never operates in a cultural vacumn but the three subjects are inseparably bound. Teaching and

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[1] Ibid., p. 722.

[2] John Povey, "The Teaching of Literature in Advanced ESL Classes", in: *Teaching English As a Second or Foreign Language*, Marianne Celce-Murcia and Lois McIntosh (eds.), Newbury House, Rowley, MA 1979, p. 163.

[3] Lee and Roberson, *op. cit.*, p. ix.

learning about a culture, though, can present enormous problems for most teachers and students, especially outside the social context, i.e. abroad. "The American element that rendered the work difficult might become precisely the reason for the selection (...) it could be argued that it is the teacher's duty to explore that American culture precisely because it is unfamiliar"[1]. American culture is often ignored, or poorly or incompletely presented, using a straightforward didactic approach that is in contrast with the revelations of American folk tales, which give a 'feel' for the culture.

> The storyteller's art (...) can take many disciplines from the realm of the often dreary textbook and raise them to great heights of exciting, fruitful experiences in learning. Storytelling as a pedagogical technique has been used by the world's greatest teachers. Jesus used it, as did Plato, Confucius, and other great philosophers and teachers... The modern teacher who employs this technique as a teaching tool is using an ancient method that is as modern as tomorrow[2].

The age-old storytelling art can be shockingly direct. There are no barriers between the listener and the teller: no desks, no lecturns, no blackboards, no text books, no notepads, no audio-visual equipment. Folk tales educate, illustrate, enlighten, stimulate the mind, and motivate the learner in an exclusively positive setting, in which there are no discipline problems, no underachievers, no failures.

## *Conclusion*

> "Great art", wrote John Jay Chapman, "does not come on call, and when it comes it is always shy". And when in the intellectual and spiritual development of a nation it does come, "it is always based on

[1] POVEY, *op. cit.*, p. 179.
[2] CHAMBERS, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

folklore, tradition, and a reverence for the past"[1] (RICHARD CHASE, *American Folk Tales and Songs*).

Folk tales are an inspiration to artists: novelists like John Steinbeck and Erskine Caldwell, poets like Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg, painters like Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood, and composers like Aaron Copland and Roy Harris. Folklore puts a high value on aesthetic beauty. The topics of the humanities are treated in folk tales: generational conflict, male-female relations, the role of the family, class struggle, the place of work in one's life, the place of minority groups in society, etc. Telling a traditional American tale is like building a bridge to the past, fostering not only an understanding of how people lived and felt long ago, but, through imaginative identification with the story's characters, also empathy and respect for the people of today. "Folklore is something which the individual has in common with his fellows, just as all have eyes and hands and speech. It is not contrary to himself as an individual but a part of his equipment. It makes possible—perhaps it might be defined as that which constitutes—his rapport with his particular segment of mankind"[2]. Richard Chase concludes: "It is not the old songs and tales that are so important in themselves; it is a way of life, the essence of ourselves and of our kindred, and knowledge of a higher set of values in the realm of the mind and spirit, that my people here in America have taught me"[3]. Folk tales, and other folklore, are central to the life of the American people, to any understanding of American society, and to American Studies in general.

E. Martin Pedersen

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[1] RICHARD CHASE, *American Folk Tales and Songs*, New American Library, New York 1956, p. 15.

[2] LEACH, "Folklore" (M. HARMON), cit., p. 400.

[3] CHASE, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

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